

**A Rhythmic and Phonologic Study on Chaucer:
With Special Reference to *The General Prologue* and *The Knight's Tale****

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0. Introduction

As a matter of fact, most of the English poems are written with carefully counted syllables and selected rhymes, for they are supposed to be read aloud. Chaucer's poems should be no exception. However, since Chaucer wrote in the so-called "middle English" which is the English before the Great Vowel Shift, its pronunciation differs greatly from it is today. Still, this should not be a problem bothering a modern reader, because there are abundant previous studies which explain Chaucer's pronunciation clearly and detailedly. Therefore, instead of treating how to read Chaucer, this paper will firstly introduce several occasions on which reading is easily misled or confused by scansion, and then analyse some instances from the perspective of "sound". All the verses in this paper, if without special explanations, are cited from the third edition of *THE RIVERSIDE CHAUCER*.

1. The Differences Caused by Caesurae

Just as Ian Robinson stated, "... scanning is not reading ... [the models of scansion] appear to be giving advice about reading while really obscuring the essential questions about what metrical reading is" (1971: 54). Scansion on one hand presents us a clear picture of metre, while at the same time may confuse the actual reading.

Caesura, which refers to the internal pause of a verse, is of vital importance in reading, for it not only intensifies the rhythm and keep the balance, but also eases our reading of the long ten- or eleven-syllabic verses by allowing the time to breathe. While as a matter of fact, most scansions are based on the texts without caesural marks, which gives birth to the confusions. For example, hiatuses are supposed to occur between the words in bold in the following instances for the convenience of metre, for this can not only avoid the conflict of the two subsequent vowels, but also reduce the lines with one unnecessary syllable so that they can approach to the "regular" iambic pentametre.

* This paper is a modified and enlarged version of my master thesis, "A Rhythmic and Phonetic Study in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*", presented to Graduate School of Letters, Hiroshima University in 2016.

(1) Thāt rōundēd às ā **bélle** || **out** òf the préssē.¹ [A². 263]

(2) ^ Óldē Ÿpócrās, || **Hály**, || **and** GálŸén, [A. 431]

(3) **Vīctōriē**, || **and** às ā cōnquēror tō lŸvén, [A. 916]

(4) Fūlfild òf **īre** || **and** òf īniquīté, [A. 941]

This reasonable practice may seem to be unnatural in reading, because in all those lines caesurae have to be taken between the two subsequent vowels. These caesurae separate the closely connected vowels and make it unnecessary and impossible to read them as it is supposed to be in scansion. For example, in actual reading, since it is allowed by the caesura, the second syllable of the word “ire” in (4) should be pronounced, while the subsequent “and” may be pronounced as “/ənd/” or even “/nd/” according to the principle of isochronism.³ The difference is therefore proved to be obvious, and in fact, 186 such examples are found even in the first 1,000 lines of the *Canterbury Tales*, which means that this is a problem serious enough to require our attention.

Besides, Skeat expects more from the caesura: he puts forward similarly that a caesura allows extra syllables to be preserved (1927: xxii). But his “extra syllables” include also such ones as “/ə/” of “lévər” in:

(5) Fōr hīm wās **lévər**--- hāv’ át hīs béddēs héed.

He argues that although the word “lever” in the above line should be scanned as “lévər”, it should be pronounced as two syllables, for the pause gives time to the “-er”, and lists several other examples (1927: xxii). I totally agree with his opinion, and his statement further proves my proposition.

2. The Confusing Enjambment

Next, as I have discussed caesura which is the pause within a line, the pause at the end should also be given due attention, for it influences reading as well. It is very natural for us, when reading, to take a pause at the end of each verse, but it is notable that Chaucer is famous for his skillful technique of

¹ All the scansions in this paper, if without special note, are my own. “~” is marked above a “non-stressed syllable”; “^” is marked above a secondarily stressed syllable and “’” is marked above a “primarily stressed syllable”; “||” stands for a caesura. And about caesurae, the following book is referred to: Ruggiers, P. G. (ed.) (1979) *The Canterbury Tales: A Facsimile and Transcription of the Hengwrt Manuscript with Variants from the Ellesmere Manuscript*. Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press.

² “A” here refers to the “group A” of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*.

³ According to the principle of isochronism all the feet should be read with the same period of time; the time to read the second syllable of “ire” and the time to breathe has to be taken from the subsequent word, i.e. “and”.

using enjambment. Enjambment means that no pause should be taken at the end, so theoretically the enjambed line should be read connectedly with the next. Two instances are necessary here:

- (6) Fõr ùntõ swích ă wórhỹ mán | **ăs hé**
Ăcórdēd nāt, | ăs by hīs fācũltée, [A. 243-44]
- (7) Ă dāggērę hāngỹngę òn ă láas | **hāddę hé**
Ăbòutę hīs nékkę, | ùndēr hīs árm ădóun. [A. 392-93]

As we can see, the first lines of both exampls have internal caesurae after their eighth syllables: respectively after “man” and “laas”. A pause at the end, as we often take in reading, will break the balance and rhythm.

Scansion is necessary here, for it distinguishes the lines with enjambment and assists our reading. However, as it has been stated, scansion is not reading. Relying too much on scansion will confuse us as well. The reason is simple: not all the enjambed lines should be read connectedly.

Those enjambed lines with excessive numbers of syllables included between their internal caesurae, as in the following examples, can hardly be read connectedly:⁴

- (8) Hě wòldę | **thě sée wěre képt fõr ány thýng**
Bitwixě Middēlbūrh | ănd Òrěwěllě. [A. 276-77]
- (9) Įn término | **hāddę hě cáas** | **ănd dóomēs ăllě**
Thăt fròm thě týmę ۆf Kýng Williām | wěre fállě. [A. 323-24]

Both parts in bold of the above two examples contain fourteen syllables, which are too difficult to be read at once.

However, under certain conditions, despite the large numbers of syllables included between the internal caesurae, enjambed lines in scansion should also be enjambed in actual reading. The following example of two lines in the Book V of *Troilus and Criseyde* explains this:

- (10) Áy ăs hě ród | tō Pándārūs hě tóldě
Hīs nēwě sórwe | ănd ẹk hīs jóięs óldě, [TC⁵ Book V. 557-58]

Here, Troilus found a cause to go to Criseyde’s house after she was gone, but he was so sad to see the quenched lantern and the closed cold door, that he lamented and rode to Pandarus to tell him his new sorrow and old joy. Although it would not be wrong to neglect the enjambment and take a pause after

⁴ I consider it as a defect of Chaucer’s iambic pentametre poems.

⁵ TC represents *Troilous and Criseyde*.

“tóldě”, it is definitely better to read the eleven syllables “tō Pándārūs hě tóldě Hīs nēwě sórwe” continuously. There are three main reasons for this: firstly, reading the eleven syllables continuously can represent the very way that Troilus spoke in wrathfulness and frustration when he panted all his new sorrow out; or in other words, the stifling feeling of reading these many syllables may help us to understand Troilus’s painful heart better. Secondly, these eleven syllables form a contrast with the seven syllables “ānd èk hīs jóīes óldě”, which may indicate that the “new sorrow” is even “longer” or “more” than the “old joy”. Thirdly, reading them continuously can give birth to an anapest in “tóldě Hīs nēwě” so that the adjective “nēwě” can be strong enough to be parallelized with the rhyming word “óldě” and the tempo of the verse can be accelerated. All these factors stated above mean that we should take advantage of enjambment when it is necessary to improve our reading.

3. Flexibility is Needed in Reading

That reading should not be done completely according to scansion can also be proved by the fact that those syllables marked by “~” are not necessarily weak and those marked by “’” or “`” are not necessarily strong. Iambic pentametre lines have ten positions. The odd positions are supposed to be filled by non-stressed syllables and the even ones by the stressed syllables; but even a master like Chaucer cannot avoid putting a syllable which is supposed to be strong in an odd position or a weak one in an even position. For instance, “lăy” with a non-stressed mark in the following line should be read more intensively than the stressed syllables “it” and “in”:

(11) Wīthòutēn hīre, īf it **lăy** īn hīs mýght. [A. 538]

And “Ĕr” below should not be weaker than “it”:

(12) **Ĕr** it wěre dáy, ās wàs hīr wónę tō dó, [A. 1040]

Similarly, “Thīs” should be stronger than “wàs” in reading:

(13) **Thīs** wàs thē fówrđ, pléynlŷ fòr t’ ěndítě, [A. 1209]

“Lăt” below is not weak at all:

(14) **Lăt** hŷm bē wár! Hīs nékkě līth tō wéddě. [A. 1218]

And “Whō” actually should also be read as a stressed word:

(15) **Whǽ** sǫrwǣth nǫw bǫt wófŭl Pǎlǎmóun, [A. 2652]

In any ways, scansion is doubtlessly important, but it is not flexible enough, because it is supposed to be “objective”,⁶ while reading should be based on our own comprehension of the verses and therefore is “subjective”. We should refer to scansion and should at the same time free our reading.

4. The Sound of Chaucer’s Verses

As it has been stated above, poems are written to be read aloud. As a master who is called “the father of English poetry”, Chaucer must also have concentrated his efforts on the sound of his poems in addition to their meanings. Analyses aimed to discover the artistry of his “sound” are carried out. Sanki Ichikawa and Tamotsu Matsunami (1987) present all the lines with phonetic symbols. Their study is referred to in this section, but since it is based on a different manuscript and is to some extent obsolete, there are many places amended according to my own consideration. Besides, Hakuson Ishii (1976) gives a detailed explanation of what he calls the “tone-colour”, which means the symbol of each sound. His work is also a help to this section.

The opening six lines of *General Prologue* are quoted here with their phonetic symbols, as they are believed to be fine materials for exploring Chaucer’s techniques in his use of sound.

(16) Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote

V⁷: /a:/ /a/ /a:/ /i/ /i/ /i/ /u:/ /ə/ /ɔ:/ /ə/

C: /hw/ /n/ /θ/ /t/ /p/ /l:/ /w/ /θ/ /h/ /s/ /ʃ/ /t/ /s/ /s/ /t/

As we can see, even the first three vowels reflect the author’s excellent attainments: they share the same base “/a/”, but with different lengths: “/a:/” in “whan” is half-long, “/a/” in “that” is short and “/a:/” in “Aprill” is long. They deliver an image of “broad and bright” and open the poem grandly. Subsequently come three “/i/”s with different intensities as well. The “/i/” in “Aprill” is the weakest of them all, because it not only occupies a non-stressed position, but is followed by the long liquid “/l:/” as well. Strictly, it should be pronounced “[i̯.]”. The vowel /i/ in “with” is the strongest of them, as it occupies a stressed position and its consonant echoes the initial stressed “whan”. Compared to this, “/i/” in “his”, although weak, is the second strongest of the three. The vowel “/i/” as in “bit”, “little”, “mini” conveys a feeling of “mild and gentle”⁸: it may indicate the rain. Next comes the long vowel “/u:/” with an image of “deep” and the line rhymes with “/ɔ:/”, which is called the most

⁶ I consider it to be “objective” because it is ideally supposed to be so, but actually we can find many scholars “subjectively” make some changes to approach the verses to certain forms.

⁷ “V” stands for “vowels” and “C” below for “consonants”.

⁸ All the sound symbols in this section are quoted from or referred to Ishii (1976: 153-56).

sonorous sound. Besides, the consonants are also “mild and tender”, for most of the consonants are voiceless.

(17) The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,

V: /ə/ /u:/ /ə/ /a:/ /a/ /e:/ /ə/ /ɔ:/ /ə/ /ɔ:/ /ə/

C: /θ/ /dr/ /x/ /t/ /f/ /m/ /r/ /tʃ/ /h/ /θ/ /p/ /r/ /s/ /d/ /t/ /θ/ /r/ /t/

Since “/a/” in “hath” should be pronounced as “[ä]”, which is quite similar to “/ə/”, and all the other vowels in the weak positions are schwas, that is, “/ə/”, the stage of this line is left to the stressed vowels and some of the consonants. The “/u:/” in “droughte” echoes the one in “shoures”, and emphasizes the impression of “deep”. “March” with the same strong “/a:/” is in contrast with “Aprill”, and “perced”, followed by the sonorous “/ɔ:/” in “to” and “/ɔ:/” in “roote”, is given an image of “vigorous and energetic”. Many voiced consonants and those which are voiceless but fricative (“/θ/”, “/f/”, “/h/”, “/θ/”, “/s/”, “/θ/”) and the affricative (“/tʃ/”) indicate the way in which the rain touches things and penetrates into the ground.

(18) And bathed every veyne in swich licour

V: /a/ /a:/ /ə/ /e/ /i/ /ei/ /i/ /i/ /i/ /u:/

C: /nd/ /b/ /ð/ /d/ /v/ /r/ /v/ /n/ /n/ /sw/ /tʃ/ /l/ /k/ /r/

(19) Of which vertu engendred is the flour;

V: /ɔ/ /i/ /ə/ /iu/ /e/ /e:/ /ə/ /i/ /ə/ /u:/

C: /f/ /hw/ /tʃ/ /v/ /r/ /t/ /n/ /dʒ/ /n/ /dr/ /d/ /s/ /θ/ /f/ /l/ /r/

Diphthongs first appear in these two lines: “/ei/” in “veyne” and “/iu/” in “vertu”. Both words begin with “v”, which is called the most beautiful consonant. These two words echo each other and reflect the intimacy of both lines. Besides, “bathed” with the same intensive vowel “/a:/” as “Aprill” and “March” declares that it is the key word of the line, and its plosive “/b/” endows the word with impetus. Moreover, many clusters appear here: “/nd/”, “/sw/”, “/tʃ/”, “/hw/”, “/tʃ/”, “/dʒ/”, “/dr/”, indicating the variety of the flowers.

(20) Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth

V: /a/ /e:/ /i/ /u:/ /e:/ /i/ /i/ /e:/ /ə/ /e:/

C: /hw/ /n/ /z/ /f/ /r/ /s/ /k/ /w/ /θ/ /h/ /s/ /sw/ /t/ /br/ /θ/

Whether it is an accident or a deliberate arrangement by Chaucer, the vowels of this line are extremely interesting. If we consider only the degree of the opening of our lips when we read them, we can find that the degree decreases generally in the first four vowels: “/a/” is bigger than “/e:/”

which is bigger than “/i/”, and “/i/” is bigger than the close lip-rounding “/u/”. On the other hand, the degree increases generally in the last four vowels: “/i/” is smaller than “/e:/” which is smaller than “/ə/”, and “/ə/” is smaller than “/ε:/”. As to the two vowels in the middle, “/ε:/” is bigger than “/i/”. It is not *excessive* to say that those movements of lips symbolize those of the “west spring wind” which blew from mountains to valleys, from plains to plateaus and from grasslands to forests. The clusters “/sw/” and “/br/” indicate that the wind is sometimes “soft” and “silent”, but it sometimes “bursts”.

(21) Inspired hath in every holt and heath

V: /i/ /i:/ /ə/ /a/ /i/ /e/ /i/ /ɔ:/ /a/ /ε:/

C: /n/ /sp/ /r/ /d/ /(h)/ /θ/ /n/ /v/ /r/ /h/ /lt/ /nd/ /h/ /θ/

The reader’s eye is caught by the alliteration of “holt and heeth” in this line, the author’s use of the glottal fricative sound “h” is consummate here, for it vividly represents the sound of the “Zephyr”. With the help of the most sonorous vowel “/ɔ:/”, the zephyr in “holt” sounds powerful, while in “heeth”, with the function of “/ε:/”, the wind sounds gentler. Therefore, even in similar places like “holt” and “heeth”, the wind is differently portrayed by the author.

Apart from the “holt and heeth” above, there are many other examples of alliteration, which can illustrate the exquisiteness of the author’s use of sound. According to Baum, “Chaucer employs alliteration in all its varieties, seldom as a mere ornament laid on for conspicuous effect, often subtly without drawing attention to it. Too much of it, along with rime, would be oppressive. But everywhere, whether obvious or concealed, whether deliberate or accidental, it adds prosodic color and interest” (1961: 58-59). He is right: Chaucer’s alliteration is so subtle as to be necessarily treated seriously and read carefully. In the following part, I would like to analyse some of the representative examples.

Among all the consonants, Chaucer seems to have alliterated with “s’s” most frequently in the specimen. Although many examples are found, only one is to be introduced here.

(22) Ůp **sp**ryngĕn **sp**érĕs twéntý fōot ōn hīghtĕ;

Ůt gōon thĕ **sw**érdĕs às thĕ **s**ílvĕr brīghtĕ; [A. 2607-08]

The use of the cluster “sp(r)” in this first line of the example is an artful choice: “/s/” is originally a weak sound, as in “silent”, which gives a feeling of “cold and calm”. It is voiceless, but fricative. The consonant “/p/” is also a voiceless sound, and therefore it is sometimes gentle as in “sleep”. But when it comes subsequently after “/s/”, as in this example, it becomes plosive. Therefore, “sp” itself conveys a nuance of “to burst from silence” which coincides with the meaning of the verse that “the

spears spring up twenty feet high”. The “r” after “sp” in “sþryngen” which moderates the “explosive force” has the function of giving a slow motion of the scene. “s’s” in the line below is either followed by a voiced semivowel “/w/” or a vowel “/i/” and therefore, transmits its original nuance of “cold”. Hence, the meaning here is interesting: although the light emitted by the sword is “bright”, it is “cold”. On the other hand, since “/s/” is fricative, it is suitable here to indicate the friction produced by the sword, pulled out from the scabbard.

Another example I wish to analyse is one which alliterates with “w’s”:

(23) “Ī, wrēcchē, **w**hich thāt **w**ēpe ānd **w**áylē thús,
Wās whílōm wýf tō kýng Cāppānēús, [A. 931-32]

This is the scene in which the women wept and wailed, begging Theseus to avenge their husbands. The woman’s grief and indignation were expressed not only by the content of her speech, but also by the way she acted and the “sound” she uttered. The “sound” is the key here: Chaucer ingeniously used the repetition of “/w/”. As a matter of fact, “/w/” is a sound with an image of “dispirited and discouraged”. Except for “/d/” which is “dark and heavy”, “/w/” is the most suitable sound I can think of to express the woman’s lament. Besides, using the rhyming sound “/u:/” is also clever, for “/u:/” itself has a color of “sadness” as it resembles the sound of crying.

The following artful line is one with two alliterations:

(24) With **m**ýghty **m**áces thē **b**ónēs thēy tō**b**rēstē. [A. 2611]

This line with the brief meaning of “they shatter the bones with mighty maces”⁹ depicts one scene of the battle. The first alliteration with “m’s” gives a “calm” picture, as if the fierce battle returned to peace at that moment, for “/m/” is a sound of “gentle and mild”. The consonant “/m/” in “myghty” is followed by “/i:/”, while in “maces” it is followed by a more sonorous “/a:/” which may indicate that the battle escalated. And the second alliteration with the plosive “/b/” shows that the battle burst fiercely again, for “/b/” in “bones” is succeeded by the most sonorous sound “/ɔ:/”. Moreover, “/r/” in “tobreste” as in “river” indicates something “liquid”, and “/b/” and “/r/” together indicate “something liquid flowed out”. The liquid here, certainly, should be the blood. Besides, since the trisyllabic word is the one with the most syllables of the alliterated words and of the line, it can be read as implying that the battle became white-hot.

The next instance is the line immediately following the one above.

⁹ All the translations in this paper are mine.

(25) Hē **thúrgh** the **thíkkēstę** of the **thróng** gān **thréstę**; [A. 2612]

This line describes the scene in which a man “began to thrust through the thickest of the throng” during the battle. The use of the “th” sound “/θ/” is exquisite. The four words with primary stresses with “th” are actually divided into two groups by “of” with a secondary stress in the middle. In “thurgh” and “thikkeste” the “th’s” are followed by vowels, that is, “/u/” and “/i/”, while their counterparts “throng” and “threste” are followed by the same consonant “/r/”. As has been mentioned above, “/u/” itself in “thurgh” delivers an image of “deep” or “going inside” and the fricative “/x/” at the end of this word gives a feeling that “something is blocked”. Similarly, in “thikkeste”, “/θi/” is followed by the “firm and solid” long consonant “/k:/”, which indicates that the “throng is really thick” so that “to thrust through is not an easy thing”. However, in the second pair the approximant “/r/” after the “th’s” indicates that although it was strenuous, the man finally went through the throng. In addition, it is interesting to note that when we pronounce the sound “/θ/” we put our tongue between our teeth, which feels as if the tongue is struggling to thrust out from the teeth, and that this movement coincides with that of the man.

With the hope of presenting a more detailed picture of Chaucer’s alliteration, some more instances are listed below without detailed explanations.

(26) Ā **shítęn** **shéphęrde** ān ā clénę **shéep**. [A. 504]

(27) Thęr **shýveręn** **sháftęs** upōn **shéeldęs** **thíkkę**; [A. 2605]
(Lines alliterating “sh’s”.)

(28) Ā lóvęęę ān ā lústý bāchęlór, [A. 80]
(A line alliterating “l’s”.)

(29) Ā **mánlý** **mán**, tō bėen ān **ábbót** **áblę**. [A. 167]
(Two alliterations, one with “m’s” and another with “ab’s”.)

(30) Āl **fúl** of **frėsshę** **flóuręs**, whýtę ān réedę. [A. 90]

(31) Fáirę ĩn ā **fėeld**, thęr ās hę thóughtę tō **fíghtę**. [A. 984]
(Lines alliterating “f’s”.)

(32) ĩn thís vřáge shāl **tėllę** **tálęs** **twéyę** [A. 792]
(A line alliterating “t’s”.)

(33) Ānđ fōr tō **mákę** yōw the **móorę** **múry**, [A. 802]
(A line alliterating “m’s”)

(34) Wĭth **h**úntę **ā**nd **h**órn **ā**nd **h**óundęs **h**ým bĭsýdĕ. [A. 1678]
(A line alliterating “h’s”.)

(35) Őut **br**ést thĕ **bl**óod wĭth **st**iĕrne **str**émĕs rĕdĕ; [A. 2610]
(A line alliterating different consonant clusters.)

5. Final Remarks

It is universally acknowledged that Chaucer should be read aloud. Although scansion is important, it should be considered no more than an assistance to reading. Since no one can read without taking pauses, the importance of the caesura cannot be over-emphasized. It is notable that Chaucer’s caesura should not be treated rigidly, because just as Ten Brink has stated, Chaucer’s caesura is moveable (1901: 218). Take the 424th line of the *General Prologue* as an example: although Hengwrt’s manuscript puts the caesura after the fourth syllable as,

(36) Ānón hĕ yáf | thĕ sĭkĕ mán hĭs bóotĕ,

it should never be wrong if we adopt the caesura as in (37) in actual reading:

(37) Ānón || hĕ yáf thĕ sĭkĕ mán || hĭs bóotĕ.

(36) is good in terms of balance, but (37) draws the audience’s attention to the key words “anon” and “boote” so that they can catch the meaning precisely. Both of them are right and we can choose according to our own needs. Moreover, as I have stated above, one can intensify a syllable in a weak position or weaken one in a strong position to meet the requirements of logic or content. All these mean that, as long as it is right, we can take advantage of scansion and read in a relatively free way.

Texts

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